

## Declan O'Byrne, new rector of Sophia by Michele Zanzucchi

Prof. Declan O'Byrne (1970) from Ireland is the new rector of the Sophia University Institute in Loppiano (Figline and Incisa Valdarno). He had been acting rector of the same institute for more than a year. Elected by the Academic Council last January, he has now been officially appointed. A theologian with a doctorate in systematic theology from Dublin City University, and a post-doctorate on dogmatic foundations for a Trinitarian anthropology at Sophia, he has also taught in Ireland, Kenya and Poland. He has numerous publications to his credit, most recently *The Paradise Hypothesis '49. Per una lettura teologica del testo di Chiara Lubich*, published by Città Nuova. We asked the new rector some questions.



***What does it mean to become rector of a university institute that has a precise charismatic root but remains open to the Church and society?***

First of all, I would say that it is precisely because of its charismatic root that Sophia naturally opens up to the Church and society. Universities have long realised that **specific attention must be paid to the relationship with the non-academic world**: not always to the Church explicitly, but to society in general. This is why there is talk of a 'third mission' for universities: after teaching and research, here is the mission at the service of society. Sophia's charismatic root reinforces the motivation for this openness. The 'charism of unity', linked to Chiara Lubich's legacy, is naturally oriented towards the continuous renewal of the Church and society, and the building of a more united world. This could also be said of any university reality promoted by the Catholic Church, but I would say that the focus on this dimension is very explicit in our case. Becoming rector of a university with this root also means accompanying the work of the governing collegiate bodies and the entire academic community to be faithful to this mission.

### ***What does Sophia have to bring that is original to today's Church and cultural environment?***

I do not know how important it is for us to insist on what is 'original'. It is better for others to see and highlight it. Certainly, however, one can say that at Sophia there is an attempt to be authentic interpreters of this charismatic root and to make it bear fruit in the most varied ways, even beyond the place where it first developed and deepened: that is, even beyond the Focolare Movement. Since the beginning of Sophia, it has been thought that a component, perhaps characteristic, of Sophia is the attention to ensuring that **research and studies are always linked to "life"**: that is, that in some way one lives what one studies and studies what is already life. Another element might be the attempt **to get people (students and lecturers) from different disciplines to work together on issues of real importance to human society**: if we address topical issues such as the ecological challenge or the digital challenge, for example, our focus is on addressing these issues in an inter- and transdisciplinary way. Our belief is that the study of complex challenges is enhanced when, beyond technical approaches, we also open up to the anthropological, philosophical, and religious dimensions of the issues addressed. I would say, finally, that the training offered to Sophia students relies on the **rational and relational skills** that can be developed in an environment where one is actually in constant contact with the most varied people: from different cultural backgrounds and religious formations.

### ***What are the open challenges and what is your work programme for the next four years?***

A comprehensive answer to this question would require about fifty pages for a complete list of open challenges. I will highlight just a few of them: the economic sustainability of a university that is still in the early years of its history; the effectiveness of its educational offerings on the academic market, particularly in the Italian market; the focusing of its activities and greater qualification of its specific work; and strengthening the functioning of its collegiate bodies. After fifteen years of activity, Sophia University Institute finds itself enriched by the work heritage of the first group of lecturers, with **new challenges to face and perspectives to develop**. I do not believe that in four years' time, when a new rector is elected, the challenges will be very different from these, but I do believe that the rector who succeeds me should be given a good basis for taking these discussions forward in a new way. I also believe that it is not possible to

think that, at some point, Sophia will have clarity on everything and so we can think about stopping and repeating a winning formula for a few decades. Instead, I think it will always be necessary to rethink what happens. But perhaps in four years it will be possible to reach the point where we can observe a robust academic reality with consolidated forces, and thus make choices that are increasingly capable of making the charismatic root effective in the service of the Church and society.

<https://www.sophiauniversity.org/en/news/declan-obyrne-new-rector-of-sophia/>